District Planning & Board Development

The Long Range Plan

Every Conservation District should have a strategic or long-range natural resource conservation plan on file in the District office. This is not intended as an in-house document. It needs to be understood by those in a position to develop, fund, approve, or administer conservation programs. Legislators, county/city commissioners, agencies, environmentalists, interest groups and individuals should be able to determine quickly what the conservation problems are, what actions need to be taken, who should take the actions, and why such actions were proposed. This document recognizes the District's current needs in resource development and the authorities with which Districts are empowered. Plans should be reviewed annually when preparing the annual plan of work and updated every five years. Amendments should be added as necessary.

An effective long-range plan will result in an improved combination of individual conservation programs with adequate funding and good administration. The plan must contain specific recommendations that can be broken down in annual segments to include: the efforts that are needed, and the levels of operation required. It should also include federal, state, local and private efforts as well as spell-out who needs to do what, why it needs to be done, and when it will be done. It should cover all of the important resource problems and needs in the District and still be brief enough to be interesting and effective.

Annual Work Plan

The District's long-range plan should be broken down into annual segments that are readily identifiable and guide the District in its day to day programs. If the annual plan is not prepared, planning and decision-making tends to be made on an "as needed" basis and long range objectives often suffer as a result. The annual plan lists the major goals the District has set for the year and the activities that will be used to achieve those goals.

In 1998 changes were made in the Memorandums of Understanding between Districts and NRCS. The Annual Operational Agreement (AOA) is the document developed locally to detail working arrangements between the District and the local field office. This Operational Agreement can be used in place of the Annual Work Plan but long range objectives should still be taken into account. The Operational Agreement should be developed jointly between the directors and the NRCS District Conservationist stating what the District expects to achieve and how it will be accomplished.

Locally Led Conservation - Developing and Using a Local Decision Making Team

Conservation District planning can not occur in a vacuum. Directors must actively seek input into the planning process from others in their District. It is essential to keep in mind that a Conservation District is a *locally* controlled resource management agency, created by concerned landowners and administered at the local level by *publicly* elected boards of directors. The District is accountable to the landowners within its jurisdiction.

The Locally led conservation process was formally organized under the 1996 Farm Bill for determining EQIP priority areas. The process, however, has been used be many Conservation Districts since their founding. Locally led conservation, as described by NRCS, means that local people assess their natural resource conditions and needs; set goals; identify programs and other resources to solve those needs; develop proposals and recommendations to do so; implement solutions; and measure their success. It is based on an assessment of conservation needs and all the assistance available to the community through government and non-governmental sources. It uses all federal, state and local conservation programs - and private sector programs - as tools to solve natural resource concerns.

As such, it is important that the District stay abreast of the needs and concerns of its community. A local decision making team, made up of a variety of leaders and interested citizens in the community, can assist directors in defining the overall direction and appropriate programs for the District to follow to meet the needs of the community and its natural resources.

The following serves as a guide to utilizing a local decision making team in the planning process:

A. Identification of Resource Concerns Using Community Leaders

1. Leaders should be from a diverse group including representatives of agricultural industry, armers, wildlife, environmentalists, fisheries, tourism, recreation, elected officials and governmental agencies.

2. When asking for representatives, be prepared to discuss the following:

   a. An estimate of how much time it will take to complete the required tasks of the committee.
   b. The purpose and responsibility of the committee.
   c. What results the district expects from the committee's efforts.

3. The meeting should be convenient to the members of the committee.

4. The results of the committee's effort should be:

   a. Identification of the critical resource concerns facing the city, townships and the county.
   b. The same list of concerns prioritized based on the importance of the concern; the potential for a solution; and the public interest in the concern.
   c. For each concern a list of individuals or organizations that would have a vested interest in that specific concern.
   d. For each concern a list of organizations that could or should be the lead organization.

B. Invite Vested Interest Leaders to a Problem Solving Process Hosted by the District to Address Critical Resource Concerns

1. Directors should invite these people personally with invitations followed by a thank-you/reinforcement letter. The following criteria should be considered in deciding whom to invite.

   a. The individual has the respect of their peers.
   b. The individual has the ability to clearly communicate their position.
   c. The individual has the ability to listen and learn.
   d. The individual has the ability to compromise and work in group settings.
   e. The individual will take the job seriously and give the necessary time.
   f. The individual must concur that there is a problem.
   g. The individual must agree that the problem is worth the investment of resources to resolve.
   h. The individual must believe that a solution is possible.

2. Again, the meeting should be convenient to the members of the committee and the invitee(s).

C. Locate a Facilitator

1. In order to help move the group through this process, a facilitator may be used.

3. The facilitator must be capable of:

   a. Separating causes from symptoms.
   b. Keeping the members focused on the issues.

D. Problem Solution

1. The facilitator should get the problem solving team to first identify and prioritize the causes of the number one priority concern. Special attention must be placed on keeping the members focused on identification and not allowing them to slip into solutions during this part of the session.

2. The facilitator should get the group to prioritize the causes of the number one priority concern based on key factors such as:

   a. The cause has a solution.
   b. The most important cause results in the greatest impact on the problem.
   c. This cause also results in the greatest payback.

3. Conduct a brain storming activity to propose solutions to the number one priority concern. This should involve taking the problem and asking for potential solutions from the group. Things to remember as you go through this process:

   a. No answer or suggestion is to be rejected.
   b. This is not the place to figure out all the details.
   c. Everyone must be given an opportunity to submit an idea.

4. The group should begin another activity to prioritize the proposed solutions remembering:

   a. The solution should result in the biggest bang for the buck.
   b. The affected people should support it.
   c. There must be someone willing to take responsibility for implementing the solution.

5. Finally, the group should identify all the details needed to implement each of the solutions. This plan should be written down and include who is responsible, milestones, starting and ending dates.

5. If you come to an insurmountable problem during any of these steps, the facilitator should ask the following:

   a. Is this issue important to the people?
   b. Do we want to give the energy and resources to solve this problem?
   c. Is there another more important issue?

This should get the group thinking about the importance of the issue. If the team agrees that this is the wrong issue or the problem is impossible to deal with, move on to the next issue.

E. The District is the Follow-Up Agency: The last responsibility of the District is to ensure that the plan is implemented.

1. If a commitment is made to hold meetings by some other organization, the District staff needs to contact that organization to make sure that commitment is being carried out.

2. If any organization cannot fulfill their commitment, they should be invited to a board meeting to explain the problem. The committee that put the plan together should be notified so that other support for implementation of the plan can be obtained.

Four Things to Remember

Sell District policy and mission

Keep in mind public or customer interest.

Support from media is crucial.

Credibility is everything.

Board Development

Ongoing development activities should be part of the plan for every board and for every director. It is important to attend state and national conferences, take part in directors' workshops, and keep up with pertinent literature. But that is not enough. It is also essential that the board make the time to evaluate on a regular basis how it is working, both as a team and as individual directors.

A board is a dynamic group. Old directors move on and new people arrive to fill the old shoes. One new personality can completely change for better or worse, the way a board functions. Circumstances and employees affecting the way Districts operate change constantly. Evaluations should take place on a yearly basis, at a minimum, to reflect inevitable changes in membership and circumstances.

Appendix D contains a copy of "A Code of Ethics for Board Members" and a set of evaluations that will assist you in testing your board's effectiveness and your effectiveness as a director. These materials were developed by the *Cain Consulting Group*. More materials are available to assist your board to be all it can be. Learn and follow the code. Make several copies of both the individual and group evaluations so that you can review them as a group on a regular basis. Make it a routine part of your board function. And, most importantly, be willing to learn and grow as a team!

Contact the Michigan Department of Agriculture's Environmental Stewardship Division or the Michigan Association of Conservation Districts for more information on board development opportunities.